



[HTTP://WWW.IHR.ORG/OTHER/WEBER2011SOUNDOFMUSIC.HTML](http://www.ihr.org/other/weber2011soundofmusic.html)

INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL REVIEW

You are here

How 'The Sound of Music' Distorts History

Hollywood Mythology About Austrians and Hitler

By Mark Weber

"The Sound of Music" is perhaps the most popular American musical picture ever produced. This entertaining 1965 movie, which includes such catchy tunes as "My Favorite Things" and "Do-Re-Mi," won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. But whatever its merits as entertainment, the film's presentation of history is deceitful. In particular, its portrayal of the 1938 union or *Anschluss* of Austria with the German Reich is a gross distortion of reality.

Ordinary Austrians are portrayed in the movie as decent, patriotic and devout, and unhappy with the grim German takeover of their country. For decades American educators and scholars have similarly presented the *Anschluss* as an act of aggression. Historian William L. Shirer, for example, in his best-selling book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, refers to the 1938 union as the "Rape of Austria."

What really happened?

According to the movie, the head of the von Trapp family decides to flee the country with his wife and children to avoid having to serve in the German navy. While it's true that Georg Ludwig von Trapp, who is played in the movie by Christopher Plummer, was a monarchist who was hostile to Hitler and National Socialism, he was never forced to choose between service in the German armed forces or emigration from the country.

In the movie, the von Trapps flee Austria in secret, hiking over the mountains into Switzerland carrying their suitcases and musical instruments. In reality, they left the

country by train, and they did so quite openly. And instead of going to Switzerland they traveled to Italy before ultimately settling in the United States. As daughter Maria said years later in an interview: "We did tell people that we were going to America to sing. And we did not climb over mountains with all our heavy suitcases and instruments. We left by train, pretending nothing,"

A more serious distortion of reality is the movie's portrayal of Austria in 1938, and the attitude of Austrians toward Hitler and National Socialism. In fact, the vast majority of Austrians joyfully welcomed the union of their homeland with Hitler's Reich. This is explained in detail, for example, in *Hitler's Austria*, a scholarly and well-referenced book by Evan Burr Bukey, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas.

In the years before the March 1938 *Anschluss*, Austria was ruled by the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg regime, a repressive one-party dictatorship that called itself a "Christian Corporative" state. It imprisoned National Socialists, Marxists and other dissidents. But there was one important section of Austria's population that supported the dictatorial regime. That was the Jewish community, which made up 2.8 percent of the total. As Prof. Bukey writes: "The Jewish community regarded the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg regime as its protector ... Under the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg regime the Jewish community recovered a measure of governmental protection it had not enjoyed since the days of the Habsburgs. The public was outraged."

In spite of their small numbers, Austria's Jews wielded vast and disproportionate wealth and power. As Prof. Bukey writes: "The predominant position of the Jews in an impoverished country only intensified the fear and loathing of the Austrians masses. As we have already seen, Jewish businesses and financial institutions managed much of the country's economic life. At the time of the *Anschluss* three-quarters of Vienna's newspapers, banks and textile firms were in Jewish hands ... The extraordinary success of the Jews in the learned professions also inspired jealousy and spite. Over 50 percent of Austria's attorneys, physicians and dentists were Jewish. "

On the eve of the *Anschluss*, Austria's economy was in a catastrophic condition, and nearly one-third of Austrians were out of work. But people also knew that, just across the border in the German Reich, unemployment had been eliminated, living standards and working conditions had greatly improved, and economic, social and cultural life was flourishing.

Even Hitler, who was himself a native of Austria, did not realize just how eagerly Austrians looked forward to the union of their homeland with the Reich. Commenting on his entry into his Austria in March 1938, Prof. Bukey writes: "What he [Hitler] did not take into account was the tumultuous welcome he would receive from the Austrian people, an outburst of frenzied acclimation seldom seen the days of the Caesars."

Virtually the only people in Austria who did not join in the general outpouring of joy was a small minority of Jews, Marxists and monarchists. Hitler ordered a free and secret national referendum on this great issue. As Prof Bukey notes: "Hitler sincerely believed that 'all state power must emanate from the people and [be] confirmed in free state elections'."

In the run-up to the referendum, Austria's Roman Catholic and Protestant leadership, along with the country's labor leaders, issued statements welcoming the incorporation of their country into Hitler's Germany. The Catholic primate of Austria, Theodor Cardinal Innitzer, personally welcomed Hitler to Vienna. Together with the country's other Bishops, Cardinal Innitzer issued a pastoral letter urging the faithful to vote for Hitler. The Catholic leaders also authorized the draping of swastika banners from the country's churches. In Austria, well as in the rest of the German Reich, approval of the *Anschluss* -- as reflected in the plebiscite -- was nearly unanimous. Even foreign observers acknowledged that the lopsided, 99 percent "Yes" vote reflected popular sentiment.

Following Austria's incorporation into the Reich, conditions improved dramatically. As Prof. Bukey writes: "In one of the most remarkable economic achievements in modern history, the National Socialists reduced the number of unemployed in Austria from 401,000 in January 1938 to 99,865 in September; in Vienna from 183,271 to 74,162 ... By Christmas [1938] 27 percent more jobs existed in Austria than before the Anschluss." In 1940 the unemployment rate fell to just 1.2 percent.

Between June and December 1938 -- that is, in just seven months -- the weekly income of industrial workers rose nine percent. "All in all," writes Prof. Bukey, "the Austrian GNP rose 12.8 percent in 1938, and 13.3 percent in 1939." Seldom in history has a country experienced such rapid, dramatic economic growth.

Shortly after the Anschluss, Germany's National Labor Law and the Reich's comprehensive social security system were introduced in Austria. These guaranteed basic rights at the workplace, afforded protection from arbitrary dismissal, quickly provided relief to more than 200,000 desperately poor people, and extended health care benefits to the working class. A large-scale construction program was launched to provide affordable housing. Cultural life was greatly encouraged, with energetic promotion of music, the fine arts and literature. Together with the increase in prosperity and optimism came a jump in the birthrate.

Economic growth continued even after the outbreak of war in September 1939, in spite of a shortage of labor and other difficulties. In 1941, Austria's GNP increased by 7.2 percent. "By 1941," writes Prof. Bukey, "wartime mobilization was bringing palpable improvement in the material conditions of everyday life to many Austrians."

In November 1941, Austria's bishops issued a pastoral letter, which was read in all churches, that reiterated support for the war against Soviet Russia. In it the Catholic

leaders solemnly declared that Germany was conducting a crusade against a monstrous "threat to Western civilization." Rather than "keep silent," the bishops went on, Catholics should "recognize the danger for all Europe should Bolshevism prevail."

During the war years, Austrians continued to apply in large numbers to join the National Socialist Party, so that by May 1943 two-thirds of a million had signed up. Austrian support for the regime remained strong to the bitter end in May 1945.

In short, the "Sound of Music" portrayal of the Austrian people's attitude toward Hitler and the National Socialist Reich is a deceitful perversion of historical reality.

-- May 2011

For Further Reading

Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938-1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Mark Weber and David Irving, "Hitler's Place in History." 2005. DVD